

Part Six



AUGUST

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how
infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and
admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension
how like a god! the beauty of the world! . . .

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

North Pole

THE SPUD LAMP WAS a big hit at the science fair. Jack and I got an A for it. It was the first A Jack got in any class all year long, so he was psyched.

All the science-fair projects were set up on tables in the gym. It was the same setup as the Egyptian Museum back in December, except this time there were volcanoes and molecule dioramas on the tables instead of pyramids and pharaohs. And instead of the kids taking our parents around to look at everybody else's artifact, we had to stand by our tables while all the parents wandered around the room and came over to us one by one.

Here's the math on that one: Sixty kids in the grade equals sixty sets of parents—and doesn't even include grandparents. So that's a minimum of one hundred and twenty pairs of eyes that find their way over to me. Eyes that aren't as used to me as their kids' eyes are by now. It's like how compass needles always point north, no matter which way you're facing. All those eyes are compasses, and I'm like the North Pole to them.

That's why I still don't like school events that include parents. I don't hate them as much as I did at the beginning of the school year. Like the Thanksgiving Sharing Festival: that was the worst one, I think. That was the first time I had to face the parents all at once. The Egyptian Museum came after that, but that one was okay because I got to dress up as a mummy and nobody noticed me. Then came the winter concert, which I totally hated because I had to sing in the chorus. Not only can I not sing at all, but it felt like I was on display. The New Year Art Show wasn't quite as bad, but it was still annoying. They put up our artwork in the hallways all over the school and had the parents come and check it out. It was like starting school all over again, having unsuspecting adults pass me on the stairway.

Anyway, it's not that I care that people react to me. Like I've said a gazillion times: I'm used to that by now. I don't let it bother me. It's like when you go outside and it's drizzling a little. You don't put on boots for a drizzle. You don't even open your umbrella. You walk through it and barely notice your hair getting wet.

But when it's a huge gym full of parents, the drizzle becomes like this total hurricane. Everyone's eyes hit you like a wall of water.

Mom and Dad hang around my table a lot, along with Jack's parents. It's kind of funny how parents actually end up forming

the same little groups their kids form. Like my parents and Jack's and Summer's mom all like and get along with each other. And I see Julian's parents hang out with Henry's parents and Miles's parents. And even the two Maxes' parents hang out together. It's so funny.

I told Mom and Dad about it later when we were walking home, and they thought it was a funny observation.

I guess it's true that like seeks like, said Mom.

The Ruggie Doll

FOR A WHILE, the “war” was all we talked about. February was when it was really at its worst. That’s when practically nobody was talking to us, and Julian had started leaving notes in our lockers. The notes to Jack were stupid, like: *You stink, big cheese!* and *Nobody likes you anymore!*

I got notes like: *Freak!* And another that said: *Get out of our school, orc!*

Summer thought we should report the notes to Ms. Rubin, who was the middle-school dean, or even Mr. Tushman, but we thought that would be like snitching. Anyway, it’s not like we didn’t leave notes, too, though ours weren’t really mean. They were kind of funny and sarcastic.

One was: *You’re so pretty, Julian! I love you. Will you marry me? Love, Beulah*

Another was: *Love your hair! xox Beulah*

Another was: *You’re a babe. Tickle my feet. xo Beulah*

Beulah was a made-up person that me and Jack came up with. She had really gross habits, like eating the green stuff in

between her toes and sucking on her knuckles. And we figured someone like that would have a real crush on Julian, who looked and acted like someone in a KidzBop commercial.

There were also a couple of times in February when Julian, Miles, and Henry played tricks on Jack. They didn’t play tricks on me, I think, because they knew that if they got caught “bullying” me, it would be big-time trouble for them. Jack, they figured, was an easier target. So one time they stole his gym shorts and played Monkey in the Middle with them in the locker room. Another time Miles, who sat next to Jack in homeroom, swiped Jack’s worksheet off his desk, crumpled it in a ball, and tossed it to Julian across the room. This wouldn’t have happened if Ms. Petosa had been there, of course, but there was a substitute teacher that day, and subs never really know what’s going on. Jack was good about this stuff. He never let them see he was upset, though I think sometimes he was.

The other kids in the grade knew about the war. Except for Savanna’s group, the girls were neutral at first. But by March they were getting sick of it. And so were some of the boys. Like another time when Julian was dumping some pencil-sharpener shavings into Jack’s backpack, Amos, who was usually tight with them, grabbed the backpack out of Julian’s hands and returned it to Jack. It was starting to feel like the majority of boys weren’t buying into Julian anymore.

Then a few weeks ago, Julian started spreading this ridiculous rumor that Jack had hired some “hit man” to “get” him and Miles and Henry. This lie was so pathetic that people were actually laughing about him behind his back. At that point, any boys who had still been on his side now jumped ship and were clearly neutral. So by the end of March, only Miles and Henry were on Julian’s side—and I think even they were getting tired of the war by then.

I’m pretty sure everyone’s stopped playing the Plague game behind my back, too. No one really cringes if I bump into them anymore, and people borrow my pencils without acting like the pencil has cooties.

People even joke around with me now sometimes. Like the other day I saw Maya writing a note to Ellie on a piece of Uglydoll stationery, and I don’t know why, but I just kind of randomly said: “Did you know the guy who created the Uglydolls based them on me?”

Maya looked at me with her eyes wide open like she totally believed me. Then, when she realized I was only kidding, she thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

“You are so funny, August!” she said, and then she told Ellie and some of the other girls what I had just said, and they all thought it was funny, too. Like at first they were shocked, but then when they saw I was laughing about it, they knew it was

okay to laugh about it, too. And the next day I found a little Uglydoll key chain sitting on my chair with a nice little note from Maya that said: *For the nicest Auggie Doll in the world! XO Maya.*

Six months ago stuff like that would never have happened, but now it happens more and more.

Also, people have been really nice about the hearing aids I started wearing.

Lobot

EVER SINCE I was little, the doctors told my parents that someday I'd need hearing aids. I don't know why this always freaked me out a bit: maybe because anything to do with my ears bothers me a lot.

My hearing was getting worse, but I hadn't told anyone about it. The ocean sound that was always in my head had been getting louder. It was drowning out people's voices, like I was underwater. I couldn't hear teachers if I sat in the back of the class. But I knew if I told Mom or Dad about it, I'd end up with hearing aids—and I was hoping I could make it through the fifth grade without having that happen.

But then in my annual checkup in October I flunked the audiology test and the doctor was like, "Dude, it's time." And he sent me to a special ear doctor who took impressions of my ears.

Out of all my features, my ears are the ones I hate the most. They're like tiny closed fists on the sides of my face. They're too low on my head, too. They look like squashed pieces of pizza

dough sticking out of the top of my neck or something. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little. But I really hate them.

When the ear doctor first pulled the hearing aids out for me and Mom to look at, I groaned.

"I am not wearing that thing," I announced, folding my arms in front of me.

"I know they probably look kind of big," said the ear doctor, "but we had to attach them to the headband because we had no other way of making them so they'd stay in your ears."

See, normal hearing aids usually have a part that wraps around the outer ear to hold the inner bud in place. But in my case, since I don't have outer ears, they had to put the earbuds on this heavy-duty headband that was supposed to wrap around the back of my head.

"I can't wear that, Mom," I whined.

"You'll hardly notice them," said Mom, trying to be cheerful. "They look like headphones."

"Headphones? Look at them, Mom!" I said angrily. "I'll look like Lobot!"

"Which one is Lobot?" said Mom calmly.

"Lobot?" The ear doctor smiled as he looked at the headphones and made some adjustments. "*The Empire Strikes Back?* The bald guy with the cool bionic radio-transmitter thing that wraps around the back of his skull?"

"I'm drawing a blank," said Mom.

"You know *Star Wars* stuff?" I asked the ear doctor.

"Know *Star Wars* stuff?" he answered, slipping the thing over my head. "I practically invented *Star Wars* stuff!" He leaned back in his chair to see how the headband fit and then took it off again.

"Now, Auggie, I want to explain what all this is," he said, pointing to the different parts of one of the hearing aids. "This curved piece of plastic over here connects to the tubing on the ear mold. That's why we took those impressions back in December, so that this part that goes inside your ear fits nice and snug. This part here is called the tone hook, okay? And this thing is the special part we've attached to this cradle here."

"The Lobot part," I said miserably.

"Hey, Lobot is cool," said the ear doctor. "It's not like we're saying you're going to look like Jar Jar, you know? That would be bad." He slid the earphones on my head again carefully. "There you go, August. So how's that?"

"Totally uncomfortable!" I said.

"You'll get used to them very quickly," he said.

I looked in the mirror. My eyes started tearing up. All I saw were these tubes jutting out from either side of my head—like antennas.

"Do I really have to wear this, Mom?" I said, trying not to cry. "I hate them. They don't make any difference!"

"Give it a second, buddy," said the doctor. "I haven't even turned them on yet. Wait until you hear the difference: you'll want to wear them."

"No I won't!"

And then he turned them on.

Hearing Brightly

HOW CAN I describe what I heard when the doctor turned on my hearing aids? Or what I didn't hear? It's too hard to think of words. The ocean just wasn't living inside my head anymore. It was gone. I could hear sounds like shiny lights in my brain. It was like when you're in a room where one of the lightbulbs on the ceiling isn't working, but you don't realize how dark it is until someone changes the lightbulb and then you're like, whoa, it's so bright in here! I don't know if there's a word that means the same as "bright" in terms of hearing, but I wish I knew one, because my ears were hearing brightly now.

"How does it sound, Auggie?" said the ear doctor. "Can you hear me okay, buddy?"

I looked at him and smiled but I didn't answer.

"Sweetie, do you hear anything different?" said Mom.

"You don't have to shout, Mom." I nodded happily.

"Are you hearing better?" asked the ear doctor.

"I don't hear that noise anymore," I answered. "It's so quiet in my ears."

"The white noise is gone," he said, nodding. He looked at me and winked. "I told you you'd like what you heard, August." He made more adjustments on the left hearing aid.

"Does it sound very different, love?" Mom asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "It sounds ... lighter."

"That's because you have bionic hearing now, buddy," said the ear doctor, adjusting the right side. "Now touch here." He put my hand behind the hearing aid. "Do you feel that? That's the volume. You have to find the volume that works for you. We're going to do that next. Well, what do you think?" He picked up a small mirror and had me look in the big mirror at how the hearing aids looked in the back. My hair covered most of the headband. The only part that peeked out was the tubing.

"Are you okay with your new bionic Lobot hearing aids?" the ear doctor asked, looking in the mirror at me.

"Yeah," I said. "Thank you."

"Thank you so much, Dr. James," said Mom.

The first day I showed up at school with the hearing aids, I thought kids would make a big deal about it. But no one did. Summer was glad I could hear better, and Jack said it made me look like an FBI agent or something. But that was it. Mr. Browne asked me about it in English class, but it wasn't like, what the heck is that thing on your head?! It was more like, "If you ever

need me to repeat something, Auggie, make sure you tell me, okay?”

Now that I look back, I don’t know why I was so stressed about it all this time. Funny how sometimes you worry a lot about something and it turns out to be nothing.

Via’s Secret

A COUPLE OF days after spring break ended, Mom found out that Via hadn’t told her about a school play that was happening at her high school the next week. And Mom was mad. Mom doesn’t really get mad that much (though Dad would disagree with that), but she was really mad at Via for that. She and Via got into a huge fight. I could hear them yelling at each other in Via’s room. My bionic Lobot ears could hear Mom saying: “But what is with you lately, Via? You’re moody and taciturn and secretive. ...”

“What is so wrong with my not telling you about a stupid play?” Via practically screamed. “I don’t even have a speaking part in it!”

“Your boyfriend does! Don’t you want us to see him in it?”

“No! Actually, I don’t!”

“Stop screaming!”

“You screamed first! Just leave me alone, okay? You’ve been really good about leaving me alone my whole life, so why you choose high school to suddenly be interested I have no idea. ...”

Then I don't know what Mom answered because it all got very quiet, and even my bionic Lobot ears couldn't pick up a signal.

My Cave

BY DINNER THEY seemed to have made up. Dad was working late. Daisy was sleeping. She'd thrown up a lot earlier in the day, and Mom made an appointment to take her to the vet the next morning.

The three of us were sitting down and no one was talking.

Finally, I said: "So, are we going to see Justin in a play?"

Via didn't answer but looked down at her plate.

"You know, Auggie," said Mom quietly. "I hadn't realized what play it was, and it really isn't something that would be interesting to kids your age."

"So I'm not invited?" I said, looking at Via.

"I didn't say that," said Mom. "It's just I don't think it's something you'd enjoy."

"You'd get totally bored," said Via, like she was accusing me of something.

"Are you and Dad going?" I asked.

"Dad'll go," said Mom. "I'll stay home with you."

"What?" Via yelled at Mom. "Oh great, so you're going to punish me for being honest by not going?"

"You didn't want us to go in the first place, remember?" answered Mom.

"But now that you know about it, of course I want you to go!" said Via.

"Well, I've got to weigh *everyone's* feelings here, Via," said Mom.

"What are you two talking about?" I shouted.

"Nothing!" they both snapped at the same time.

"Just something about Via's school that has nothing to do with you," said Mom.

"You're lying," I said.

"Excuse me?" said Mom, kind of shocked. Even Via looked surprised.

"I said you're lying!" I shouted. "You're lying!" I screamed at Via, getting up. "You're both liars! You're both lying to my face like I'm an idiot!"

"Sit down, Auggie!" said Mom, grabbing my arm.

I pulled my arm away and pointed at Via.

"You think I don't know what's going on?" I yelled. "You just don't want your brand-new fancy high school friends to know your brother's a freak!"

"Auggie!" Mom yelled. "That's not true!"

"Stop lying to me, Mom!" I shrieked. "Stop treating me like a baby! I'm not retarded! I know what's going on!"

I ran down the hallway to my room and slammed the door behind me so hard that I actually heard little pieces of the wall crumble inside the door frame. Then I plopped onto my bed and pulled the covers up on top of me. I threw my pillows over my disgusting face and then piled all my stuffed animals on top of the pillows, like I was inside a little cave. If I could walk around with a pillow over my face all the time, I would.

I don't even know how I got so mad. I wasn't really mad at the beginning of dinner. I wasn't even sad. But then all of a sudden it all kind of just exploded out of me. I knew Via didn't want me to go to her stupid play. And I knew why.

I figured Mom would follow me into my room right away, but she didn't. I wanted her to find me inside my cave of stuffed animals, so I waited a little more, but even after ten minutes she still didn't come in after me. I was pretty surprised. She always checks on me when I'm in my room, upset about stuff.

I pictured Mom and Via talking about me in the kitchen. I figured Via was feeling really, really, really bad. I pictured Mom totally laying on the guilt. And Dad would be mad at her when he came home, too.

I made a little hole through the pile of pillows and stuffed animals and peeked at the clock on my wall. Half an hour had

passed and Mom still hadn't come into my room. I tried to listen for the sounds in the other rooms. Were they still having dinner? What was going on?

Finally, the door opened. It was Via. She didn't even bother coming over to my bed, and she didn't come in softly like I thought she would. She came in quickly.

Goodbye

"AUGGIE," SAID VIA. "Come quick. Mom needs to talk to you."

"I'm not apologizing!"

"This isn't about you!" she yelled. "Not everything in the world is about you, Auggie! Now hurry up. Daisy's sick. Mom's taking her to the emergency vet. Come say goodbye."

I pushed the pillows off my face and looked up at her. That's when I saw she was crying. "What do you mean 'goodbye'?"

"Come on!" she said, holding out her hand.

I took her hand and followed her down the hall to the kitchen. Daisy was lying down sideways on the floor with her legs straight out in front of her. She was panting a lot, like she'd been running in the park. Mom was kneeling beside her, stroking the top of her head.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She just started whimpering all of a sudden," said Via, kneeling down next to Mom.

I looked down at Mom, who was crying, too.

"I'm taking her to the animal hospital downtown," she said.
"The taxi's coming to pick me up."

"The vet'll make her better, right?" I said.

Mom looked at me. "I hope so, honey," she said quietly. "But I honestly don't know."

"Of course he will!" I said.

"Daisy's been sick a lot lately, Auggie. And she's old ..."

"But they can fix her," I said, looking at Via to agree with me, but Via wouldn't look up at me.

Mom's lips were trembling. "I think it might be time we say goodbye to Daisy, Auggie. I'm sorry."

"No!" I said.

"We don't want her to suffer, Auggie," she said.

The phone rang. Via picked it up, said, "Okay, thanks," and then hung up.

"The taxi's outside," she said, wiping her tears with the backs of her hands.

"Okay, Auggie, open the door for me, sweetie?" said Mom, picking Daisy up very gently like she was a huge droopy baby.

"Please, no, Mommy?" I cried, putting myself in front of the door.

"Honey, please," said Mom. "She's very heavy."

"What about Daddy?" I cried.

"He's meeting me at the hospital," Mom said. "He doesn't want Daisy to suffer, Auggie."

Via moved me away from the door and held it open for Mom.

"My cell phone's on if you need anything," Mom said to Via. "Can you cover her with the blanket?"

Via nodded, but she was crying hysterically now.

"Say goodbye to Daisy, kids," Mom said, tears streaming down her face.

"I love you, Daisy," Via said, kissing Daisy on the nose. "I love you so much."

"Bye, little girlie ...," I whispered into Daisy's ear. "I love you. ..."

Mom carried Daisy down the stoop. The taxi driver had opened the back door and we watched her get in. Just before she closed the door, Mom looked up at us standing by the entrance to the building and she gave us a little wave. I don't think I've ever seen her look sadder.

"I love you, Mommy!" said Via.

"I love you, Mommy!" I said. "I'm sorry, Mommy!"

Mom blew a kiss to us and closed the door. We watched the car leave and then Via closed the door. She looked at me a second, and then she hugged me very, very tight while we both cried a million tears.

Daisy's Toys

JUSTIN CAME OVER about half an hour later. He gave me a big hug and said: "Sorry, Auggie." We all sat down in the living room, not saying anything. For some reason, Via and I had taken all of Daisy's toys from around the house and had put them in a little pile on the coffee table. Now we just stared at the pile.

"She really is the greatest dog in the world," said Via.

"I know," said Justin, rubbing Via's back.

"She just started whimpering, like all of a sudden?" I said.

Via nodded. "Like two seconds after you left the table," she said. "Mom was going to go after you, but Daisy just started, like, whimpering."

"Like how?" I said.

"Just whimpering, I don't know," said Via.

"Like howling?" I asked.

"Auggie, like whimpering!" she answered impatiently. "She just started moaning, like something was really hurting her. And she was panting like crazy. Then she just kind of plopped down,

and Mom went over and tried to pick her up, and whatever, she was obviously hurting. She bit Mom."

"What?" I said.

"When Mom tried to touch her stomach, Daisy bit her hand," Via explained.

"Daisy never bites anybody!" I answered.

"She wasn't herself," said Justin. "She was obviously in pain."

"Daddy was right," said Via. "We shouldn't have let her get this bad."

"What do you mean?" I said. "He knew she was sick?"

"Auggie, Mom's taken her to the vet like three times in the last two months. She's been throwing up left and right. Haven't you noticed?"

"But I didn't know she was sick!"

Via didn't say anything, but she put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to her. I started to cry again.

"I'm sorry, Auggie," she said softly. "I'm really sorry about everything, okay? You forgive me? You know how much I love you, right?"

I nodded. Somehow that fight didn't matter much now.

"Was Mommy bleeding?" I asked.

"It was just a nip," said Via. "Right there." She pointed to the bottom of her thumb to show me exactly where Daisy had bitten

Mom.

“Did it hurt her?”

“Mommy’s okay, Auggie. She’s fine.”

Mom and Dad came home two hours later. We knew the second they opened the door and Daisy wasn’t with them that Daisy was gone. We all sat down in the living room around the pile of Daisy’s toys. Dad told us what happened at the animal hospital, how the vet took Daisy for some X-rays and blood tests, then came back and told them she had a huge mass in her stomach. She was having trouble breathing. Mom and Dad didn’t want her to suffer, so Daddy picked her up in his arms like he always liked to do, with her legs straight up in the air, and he and Mom kissed her goodbye over and over again and whispered to her while the vet put a needle into her leg. And then after about a minute she died in Daddy’s arms. It was so peaceful, Daddy said. She wasn’t in any pain at all. Like she was just going to sleep. A couple of times while he talked, Dad’s voice got trembly and he cleared his throat.

I’ve never seen Dad cry before, but I saw him cry tonight. I had gone into Mom and Dad’s bedroom looking for Mom to put me to bed, but saw Dad sitting on the edge of the bed, taking off his socks. His back was to the door, so he didn’t know I was there. At first I thought he was laughing because his shoulders were shaking, but then he put his palms on his eyes and I real-

ized he was crying. It was the quietest crying I’ve ever heard. Like a whisper. I was going to go over to him, but then I thought maybe he was whisper-crying because he didn’t want me or anyone else to hear him. So I walked out and went to Via’s room, and I saw Mom lying next to Via on the bed, and Mom was whispering to Via, who was crying.

So I went to my bed and put on my pajamas without anyone telling me to and put the night-light on and turned the light off and crawled into the little mountain of stuffed animals I had left on my bed earlier. It felt like that all had happened a million years ago. I took my hearing aids off and put them on the night table and pulled the covers up to my ears and imagined Daisy snuggling with me, her big wet tongue licking my face all over like it was her favorite face in the world. And that’s how I fell asleep.

Heaven

I WOKE UP later on and it was still dark. I got out of bed and walked into Mom and Dad's bedroom.

"Mommy?" I whispered. It was completely dark, so I couldn't see her open her eyes. "Mommy?"

"You okay, honey?" she said groggily.

"Can I sleep with you?"

Mom scooted over toward Daddy's side of the bed, and I snuggled up next to her. She kissed my hair.

"Is your hand okay?" I said. "Via told me Daisy bit you."

"It was only a nip," she whispered in my ear.

"Mommy ..." I started crying. "I'm sorry about what I said."

"Shhh ... There's nothing to be sorry about," she said, so quietly I could barely hear her. She was rubbing the side of her face against my face.

"Is Via ashamed of me?" I said.

"No, honey, no. You know she's not. She's just adjusting to a new school. It's not easy."

"I know."

"I know you know."

"I'm sorry I called you a liar."

"Go to sleep, sweet boy. ... I love you so much."

"I love you so much, too, Mommy."

"Good night, honey," she said very softly.

"Mommy, is Daisy with Grans now?"

"I think so."

"Are they in heaven?"

"Yes."

"Do people look the same when they get to heaven?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Then how do people recognize each other?"

"I don't know, sweetie." She sounded tired. "They just feel it. You don't need your eyes to love, right? You just feel it inside you. That's how it is in heaven. It's just love, and no one forgets who they love."

She kissed me again.

"Now go to sleep, honey. It's late. And I'm so tired."

But I couldn't go to sleep, even after I knew she had fallen asleep. I could hear Daddy sleeping, too, and I imagined I could hear Via sleeping down the hallway in her room. And I wondered if Daisy was sleeping in heaven right then. And if she was sleeping, was she dreaming about me? And I wondered how it

would feel to be in heaven someday and not have my face matter anymore. Just like it never, ever mattered to Daisy.

Understudy

VIA BROUGHT HOME three tickets to her school play a few days after Daisy died. We never mentioned the fight we had over dinner again. On the night of the play, right before she and Justin were leaving to get to their school early, she gave me a big hug and told me she loved me and she was proud to be my sister.

This was my first time in Via's new school. It was much bigger than her old school, and a thousand times bigger than my school. More hallways. More room for people. The only really bad thing about my bionic Lobot hearing aids was the fact that I couldn't wear a baseball cap anymore. In situations like these, baseball caps come in really handy. Sometimes I wish I could still get away with wearing that old astronaut helmet I used to wear when I was little. Believe it or not, people would think seeing a kid in an astronaut helmet was a lot less weird than seeing my face. Anyway, I kept my head down as I walked right behind Mom through the long bright hallways.

We followed the crowd to the auditorium, where students handed out programs at the front entrance. We found seats in

the fifth row, close to the middle. As soon as we sat down, Mom started looking inside her pocketbook.

"I can't believe I forgot my glasses!" she said.

Dad shook his head. Mom was always forgetting her glasses, or her keys, or something or other. She is flaky that way.

"You want to move closer?" said Dad.

Mom squinted at the stage. "No, I can see okay."

"Speak now or forever hold your peace," said Dad.

"I'm fine," answered Mom.

"Look, there's Justin," I said to Dad, pointing out Justin's picture in the program.

"That's a nice picture of him," he answered, nodding.

"How come there's no picture of Via?" I said.

"She's an understudy," said Mom. "But, look: here's her name."

"Why do they call her an understudy?" I asked.

"Wow, look at Miranda's picture," said Mom to Dad. "I don't think I would have recognized her."

"Why do they call it understudy?" I repeated.

"It's what they call someone who replaces an actor if he can't perform for some reason," answered Mom.

"Did you hear Martin's getting remarried?" Dad said to Mom.

"Are you kidding me?!" Mom answered, like she was surprised.

"Who's Martin?" I asked.

"Miranda's father," Mom answered, and then to Dad: "Who told you?"

"I ran into Miranda's mother in the subway. She's not happy about it. He has a new baby on the way and everything."

"Wow," said Mom, shaking her head.

"What are you guys talking about?" I said.

"Nothing," answered Dad.

"But why do they call it understudy?" I said.

"I don't know, Auggie Doggie," Dad answered. "Maybe because the actors kind of study under the main actors or something? I really don't know."

I was going to say something else but then the lights went down. The audience got very quiet very quickly.

"Daddy, can you please not call me Auggie Doggie anymore?" I whispered in Dad's ear.

Dad smiled and nodded and gave me a thumbs-up.

The play started. The curtain opened. The stage was completely empty except for Justin, who was sitting on an old rickety chair tuning his fiddle. He was wearing an old-fashioned type of suit and a straw hat.

"This play is called 'Our Town,'" he said to the audience. "It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by Philip Davenport. ... The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New Hampshire—just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn."

I knew right then and there that I was going to like the play. It wasn't like other school plays I've been to, like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. No, this was grown-up seeming, and I felt smart sitting there watching it.

A little later in the play, a character named Mrs. Webb calls out for her daughter, Emily. I knew from the program that that was the part Miranda was playing, so I leaned forward to get a better look at her.

"That's Miranda," Mom whispered to me, squinting at the stage when Emily walked out. "She looks so different. ..."

"It's not Miranda," I whispered. "It's Via."

"Oh my God!" said Mom, lurching forward in her seat.

"Shh!" said Dad.

"It's Via," Mom whispered to him.

"I know," whispered Dad, smiling. "Shhhh!"

The Ending

THE PLAY WAS so amazing. I don't want to give away the ending, but it's the kind of ending that makes people in the audience teary. Mom totally lost it when Via-as-Emily said:

"Good-by, Good-by world! Good-by, Grover's Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you!"

Via was actually crying while she was saying this. Like real tears: I could see them rolling down her cheeks. It was totally awesome.

After the curtain closed, everyone in the audience started clapping. Then the actors came out one by one. Via and Justin were the last ones out, and when they appeared, the whole audience rose to their feet.

"Bravo!" I heard Dad yelling through his hands.

"Why is everyone getting up?" I said.

"It's a standing ovation," said Mom, getting up.

So I got up and clapped and clapped. I clapped until my hands hurt. For a second, I imagined how cool it would be to be Via and Justin right then, having all these people standing up and cheering for them. I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their lives.

Finally, after I don't know how many minutes, the line of actors onstage stepped back and the curtain closed in front of them. The clapping stopped and the lights went up and the audience started getting up to leave.

Me and Mom and Dad made our way to the backstage. Crowds of people were congratulating the performers, surrounding them, patting them on the back. We saw Via and Justin at the center of the crowd, smiling at everyone, laughing and talking.

"Via!" shouted Dad, waving as he made his way through the crowd. When he got close enough, he hugged her and lifted her off the floor a little. "You were amazing, sweetheart!"

"Oh my God, Via!" Mom was screaming with excitement. "Oh my God, oh my God!" She was hugging Via so hard I thought Via would suffocate, but Via was laughing.

"You were brilliant!" said Dad.

"Brilliant!" Mom said, kind of nodding and shaking her head at the same time.

"And you, Justin," said Dad, shaking Justin's hand and giving him a hug at the same time. "You were fantastic!"

"Fantastic!" Mom repeated. She was, honestly, so emotional she could barely talk.

"What a shock to see you up there, Via!" said Dad.

"Mom didn't even recognize you at first!" I said.

"I didn't recognize you!" said Mom, her hand over her mouth.

"Miranda got sick right before the show started," said Via, all of out of breath. "There wasn't even time to make an announcement." I have to say she looked kind of strange, because she was wearing all this makeup and I'd never seen her like this before.

"And you just stepped in there right at the last minute?" said Dad. "Wow."

"She was amazing, wasn't she?" said Justin, his arm around Via.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the house," said Dad.

"Is Miranda okay?" I said, but no one heard me.

At that moment, a man who I think was their teacher came over to Justin and Via, clapping his hands.

"Bravo, bravo! Olivia and Justin!" He kissed Via on both cheeks.

"I flubbed a couple of lines," said Via, shaking her head.

"But you got through it," said the man, smiling ear to ear.

“Mr. Davenport, these are my parents,” said Via.

“You must be so proud of your girl!” he said, shaking their hands with both his hands.

“We are!”

“And this is my little brother, August,” said Via.

He looked like he was about to say something but suddenly froze when he looked at me.

“Mr. D,” said Justin, pulling him by the arm, “come meet my mom.”

Via was about to say something to me, but then someone else came over and started talking to her, and before I knew it, I was kind of alone in the crowd. I mean, I knew where Mom and Dad were, but there were so many people all around us, and people kept bumping into me, spinning me around a bit, giving me that one-two look, which made me feel kind of bad. I don’t know if it was because I was feeling hot or something, but I kind of started getting dizzy. People’s faces were blurring in my head. And their voices were so loud it was almost hurting my ears. I tried to turn the volume down on my Lobot ears, but I got confused and turned them louder at first, which kind of shocked me. And then I looked up and I didn’t see Mom or Dad or Via anywhere.

“Via?” I yelled out. I started pushing through the crowd to find Mom. “Mommy!” I really couldn’t see anything but people’s

stomachs and ties all around me. “Mommy!”

Suddenly someone picked me up from behind.

“Look who’s here!” said a familiar voice, hugging me tight. I thought it was Via at first, but when I turned around, I was completely surprised. “Hey, Major Tom!” she said.

“Miranda!” I answered, and I gave her the tightest hug I could give.

